

# BEATLESS

I trust in your smile. I won't care whether you are soulless or not.

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I trust in your smile. Even if you have no soul.

# Chapter 01 CONTRACT

## Phase 1



Arato's sleep was always disturbed by one of two dreams.

The first was of an inferno sweeping through a corridor. A nightmare where the whole world was ablaze in a charred red tsunami of whirling flame, rising up to swallow him whole.

The second was the memory of a dog looking up at him and wagging its tail.

Once upon a time, Arato had been hospitalized for third-degree burns after being caught in a blast of scorching air. While he was recovering there he used to sit in the eerily quiet front yard of the hospital and gaze at the people passing by.

Arato had just started elementary school. His father had been busy with his work at the time, and his sister was still little more than an infant. So his family only dropped by occasionally, and Arato had come to believe that he was hardly worth the bother of a visit.

In this hazy state, memory was but a daydream. He would take his daily dose of painkillers, and the world would go silent, as if he had been erased from its memory.

Then a white puppy entered this lonely world. The puppy was inquisitively sniffing around Arato's feet before he had even noticed it.

"Looks like he wants to be your friend," said a young nurse. He could never remember her face. But he could remember the way the puppy sidled up to him when he stroked its head. The dog had wanted and expected more, pawing at Arato as if to demand that he scratch under its chin.

The short-haired white puppy would bound towards him, wagging its tail vigorously, getting caught up with Arato's heels, so Arato had no choice but to play with it, despite the effort this caused him in his injured state.

A few days later the nurse appeared again, this time with a boy of about Arato's age in tow. "This boy wants to join your little gang," she said.

Arato looked at the boy's scrawny limbs and thought that he really looked sick. He later learned that the boy was unable to eat the hospital food and was on a drip. At the time, though, Arato didn't really know what to do, and couldn't meet the boy's eyes. Only the dog reacted to the new arrival, with bright eyes and panting excitement. It couldn't make up its mind as to which one of the two to play with next, so it just went round in circles with its tongue lolling out.

People's hearts are influenced by actions. They are influenced by things other than people.

Arato looked at the face of the boy standing there. The boy wore a dark, gloomy expression, as if he was lost in the the night. As if he wanted to cry out for help but wasn't quite sure how. He was painfully tense and keeping it all in.

Then Arato heard a little gurgling sound down by his feet. The puppy's tail was wagging so much that its hind legs seemed about to give way. Just as the world was about to overwhelming Arato with its loneliness, this bundle of overflowing joy exploded into it.

"He looks like he's having fun, doesn't he?" Arato said, his words breaking the silence.

For some reason the warmth that he felt from the dog almost made him want to cry.

The puppy was sniffing the ground and looking up at him. It was almost as if it was trying to cheer him up by being so happy that Arato couldn't help but join in with its mood.

The boy in front of Arato didn't seem to to be as badly hurt as Arato was, but his lips remained tightly sealed.

It wasn't going to be easy to extend an arm in his current state, but even so Arato made up his mind to make the first move.

"I'm Arato Endo." Summoning up all his courage, Arato took the first, tentative step. "Will you be my friend?"

Sunlight poured in through the classroom windows.

Arato Endo was sprawled out across a chair, groaning. "How can it be so hot when it's still only April..."

The sky outside was clear and parched. Inside, Arato stared at the classroom ceiling.

"I'm always amazed at how you can sleep though class so brazenly." This came from the boy standing next to Arato. The top two buttons on his regulation shirt were open. The speaker was Ryo Kaidai, who had come over to Arato's side during the class recess.

"You're one to talk. You were no better than he was." The third voice came from the occupant of the seat directly behind Arato: one Kengo Suguri.

Ryo was supremely unfazed by the dig. "Yeah, well, I read ahead yesterday. Got it covered."

Arato never really understood why Ryo was attending an ordinary high school. "Jeez, I wish I had your brains to spare."

"No need to go overboard with the praise, buddy." Ryo tried to act cool, although it was clear that some part of him at least was pleased by the reference to his superior intellect. "After all, what's the point of school these days, really? Socialization, that's about it. We're here to learn about interpersonal relationships, end of story. Brains and academic ability---these ideas are already on their way out, and they'll be completely obsolete by the next generation."

Meanwhile, Kengo was wirelessly transferring the class notes he took on his ClassCom to his PortaCom. "I do so admire the dynamism of the wealthy. Even your excuses for slacking have a certain panache to them."

The built-in screen on Arato's school desk was flashing up an alert, much to Arato's irritation. He pulled out his card-sized PortaCom from his pocket to check. Yep. Extra homework, just for him, the deadline glaring at him in red characters. "Man! Why am I the only one to be assigned extra?"

Ryo continued to expound his theories loudly oblivious to Arato's plight. "Yeah, the way I see it, ten years from now a man's job in society is going to be not much more than finding a nice little girl to become friends with." He concluded with a flourish, and it seemed like by the end of his declaration he had managed to draw the cold stares of approximately half of the class of IIC, namely twenty female students.

"I'm surprised that you're able to talk in such an easygoing way about these things, Ryo," said Kengo.

"Why?"

"Well, haven't you tried your luck with just about every single girl in this class?" Kengo asked.

"Sure. It was my new year's resolution. Try for a new girl every week. You can't fault me for effort."

There was something not quite right about the way the three boys interacted with the rest of the classroom. It was as if they didn't quite fit in, and indeed they didn't, for Ryo's unsubtle efforts at conquering the girls in the class had backfired quite spectacularly. Ryo was both handsome and effortlessly good at his studies. His habit of flitting from girl to girl had initially caused some rivalries to flare up amongst his female classmates, but before long the girls simply came to the conclusion that Ryo was basically just a bit of a dick.

The result was that Ryo was now shunned by the class---by the boys, too. So he fell back into his original clique of three.

Arato's brow was soaked with sweat. "Ryo. You say school's mainly to learn about socialization and interpersonal relationships, right? Well why don't you knuckle down and give those subjects a study sometime?"

"This Sunday any good for you, buddy? I'm meeting up with some girls from the next district over. Coming with?" Ryo grabbed hold of Arato from behind.

"Not me. I've already promised to take my sister out..."

"I'm calling you out on that one, buddy. You've already spent your allowance this month. Why would your sister want to hang out with you if not to mooch your cash?"

"Cut it out. You don't know Yuka," said Arato.

"Say, Ryo, you do like to get Arato *involved* in things, don't you?" Kengo interjected.

Ryo grinned like a village idiot.. "Yeah, well. Arato's good value."

Arato could never understand this side to Ryo's personality. Was he so brilliant that his intelligence ended up coming round full circle back to stupid? And were he and Kengo equally stupid for allowing themselves to get dragged along?

The cityscape beyond the classroom window was glittering brightly. Solar panels from the residential district across the river were reflecting the sunlight.



It was April, and the third semester of the school year had just begun.

Japan had long since adjusted its school calendar to fall into line with the American system of starting the school year in September. Strange to think now that there was once a time, a hundred years ago, when the April cherry blossoms went hand in hand with the commencement ceremonies for the new academic year.

The route home that Arato and his two friends took saw them pass along cherry-blossom-lined banks of the Sumida River. They took a sidelong glance at the famous Kototoi Bridge that had collapsed that one time last century, and passed through the gaps in the crumbling stone monuments of Ushijima Shrine before diving into the cherry-tree tunnel planted on the Bokutei Path on the bank of the Sumida River.

“What will we do for our Cherry Blossom Festival this year?” Arato wondered aloud. He stood facing the Sumida River embankment, next to a relatively new stone monument. It was a memorial to the catastrophe that had turned the whole Azuma Bridge area into a mountain of rubble. As such, it wasn't uncommon to see the elderly place bouquets of flowers there in memoriam.

Ryo had peeled the outer layer of his uniform off in response to the April sunshine. “Why don't we make this Sunday our very own Cherry Blossom Festival?”

“Jeez, you never give up, do you,” said Arato. “How many girls did you invite, anyway?” He fiddled with a small dial on his uniform to activate the coolant system built into the seams. The current activated, and Arato felt a little cooler.

Ryo looked straight at him and held up four fingers. “Four girls.”

“Well you'd better say something to them quick. Even if you did manage to rope Kengo and me into it that's still only three guys.”

“Arato, Arato, Arato,” Ryo chided him, “why, it's almost as if you're insinuating that I only have two friends.”

“You *do* only have two friends,” said Arato.



“You’re busting my balls, buddy...”

The whole area around the old Sumida Ward Office had been extensively rezoned over the last fifty years. There was now a new road grid system in place leading off from Azuma Bridge and Komagata Bridge respectively.

Cars passed by, smooth as flowing water, down the wide avenues and towards their destinations. Traffic jams were a thing of the past now that all cars had Autocruise fitted as standard.

The boys approached a crosswalk where an old woman was slowly traversing a four-lane highway. A girl in a yellow jersey was by her side, holding her hand..

Without hesitating, Arato dashed towards them. “I’ll go and help too.”

Kengo, who had been absorbed in his own world, snapped out of it. “You know the girl isn’t human?” he called out after Arato.

The girl in question had shoulder-length hair, and everything about the way she looked and acted screamed *human*.

Kengo knew his computers and machines, though. “Best not interfere when an Interfacer is at work. You’ll only get in the way.” By *Interfacer* he meant hIE of course, a Humanoid Interface Element, an android in human form. An hIE could do almost anything a real human could do. Manpower shortages were now a thing of the past, and the world was a much more convenient place, at least for the humans in it.

“But I *want* to help.” Arato ran towards the crosswalk. The girl-shaped android noticed him approaching and smiled at him.

“Could I lend you an arm, ma’am?” he said to the old lady. “The light’s about to change.”

“Why, thank you, young man,” the hunchbacked old lady replied, with a wrinkled smile of gratitude.

Humans aren’t able to transmit emotions directly, so they express themselves through their actions. However, these days non-human objects were able to perform the same type of actions.

Such was modern life for Arato and his friends. In the year AD 2105, the wheels of Japanese society spun smoothly only because androids were there to act as grease on the cogs.

"I bet you're the sort who's easily fooled," said Ryo, as they approached the shopping precinct around the Azuma Bridge Subway Station.

"What are you talking about?" said Arato. "It's just better to be nice to girls, that's all. You two could stand to learn a thing or two on that subject, by the way!"

A closer look at the boys' surroundings revealed that there were plenty of hIE hiding in open view. The hospitality industry in particular could never get enough of them, and most food and drink joints had at least one on their books.

This was Kengo's home turf now, so he was in his element. "Would you be able to tell that the girl there flipping those *taiyaki* cakes is an hIE, for example?" He pointed to the curly blonde at the *taiyaki* hotcake stand just past the intersection with Asakusa Street. "Or that waitress in the *soba* restaurant. And manning the checkouts at the supermarket on the way to the Skytree. Every one of these hIE is programmed to help an old person in need."

"They do like to serve, don't they?" said Arato.

As they were looking at her, the hIE girl at the *taiyaki* stall called out to the boys as they passed. "Would you care for some *taiyaki* hot off the griddle, sir?" she smiled. There wasn't a drop of sweat on her face.

Ryo looked at her. It was a very different sort of look to the one he gave the girls in his class. Now his gaze was steely and cold. "Arato, hIE don't *like to serve*. They don't *like* to do anything. Or are you the sort of person that sees a motor spinning and says 'gosh, doesn't it *like* to move fast'?"

"So what if I am? I'm entitled to my opinion?" said Arato.

"Yep, and you're entitled to live in cloud cuckoo land, too," said Ryo.

"And we all know that the good burghers of cloud cuckoo land are powerless in the face of scientific progress," Kengo interjected.

"Yeah, well, you know me. Embrace scientific progress or be drowned by it. It's my duty to lend my unenlightened friends a helping hand," said Ryo.

And so it went, as usual, the three friends bickering about everything and nothing.

Just then, though, Arato saw something in the corner of his eye. Something out of place.

A black alley cat in the back lane, just beyond the *soba* restaurant delivery bikes, appeared to be dragging something with its mouth.

The cat was struggling with a white object almost as big as itself. A strange object, shimmering in the afternoon sunlight.

*A human arm.*

"Ugh... what the..." The blood rushed from Arato's head.

It was a right forearm, to be precise, covered in smooth white skin. The cat fled the scene, leaving behind only the severed human limb.

"Again, huh?" Kengo exclaimed, lifting the arm and shaking it from side to side. White tubes started protruding from the cross-section where the arm had been severed at the elbow, and a liquid began dripping out. "There have been a few cases like this recently. Guys going round deliberately destroying hIE. Their remains have been found as scrap. What a waste."

"What a *waste*? Don't you feel sorry for them at all?" Arato asked.

The arm was pulsating now. The smooth white hand looked exactly like that of a little girl. It may not have come from a real human, but it sure looked human enough.

"For their owners, maybe," Kengo continued. "They'll sure see it as a waste--- your average hIE costs as much as a car, you know."

Arato reached forward to touch the severed hand, but Ryo placed his hand on Arato's shoulder to hold him back. "Don't touch it, you don't know where it's been!"

"We can't just leave it in a dumpster, though," Arato said. He thought of the girl in the yellow jersey who helped the old lady across the road. It was heartbreaking

to consider that some gentle little creature like her could have been smashed up so senselessly.

“Arato, I think you’re forgetting something, buddy,” Ryo replied. “When these hIE help people they’re just acting according to their pre-programmed settings. They see something that looks vaguely human, they act nice towards it. Helps get people to buy more of them, you know?” He looked down at the body part. “This is just a commercial object.”

And indeed, even though the boys were standing in the middle of a bustling shopping area, none of the passers-by seemed unduly troubled by the hand that Kengo was holding aloft.

Arato could tell that his friends didn’t particularly like hIE. And some of the passers-by didn’t give the thing that Kengo was holding a second glance, either. Others seemed a little more sympathetic. But none had the sort of reaction you would have expected had the owner of the severed arm been human.

The same went for Arato too, of course. He no longer felt the same sense of danger and agitation that he had experienced for a second when he thought the arm was real.

Even so, it looked human enough. It had to be entitled to *something* like human dignity, no?

“Let’s take it to the police,” Arato said. “I can’t bear to just dump it.”

## Phase 2



Later that night an incident occurred in a corner of TBRA-2: the Second Tokyo Bay Reclaimed Archipelago.

The sound of a heavy explosion emanated from the base of a building located in the middle of a sprawling research facility. Moments later, acrid smoke started billowing out of the building's entrance.

The 50-metre high building then saw all of its external windows across its 15 storeys implode in quick succession. The black polyfiber walls rippled quietly.

Then all the lights went out. This was the moment that the Memeframe Corporation, one of the chief stakeholders in the country's hIE management systems, saw its Tokyo Research Facility die.

*22:08.* A large transport helicopter approached TBRA-2 from the sea. A scramble order had been declared seconds after the initial explosion. Hand of

Operation, the Private Military Company on retainer to Memeframe, had mobilized for quick recon.

The chopper had launched from the nearby Funabashi in Chiba Prefecture and was carrying a large container.

The pilot, who wore a head-mounted display, turned to speak to the man behind him. “20 minutes, sir, that’s what USFJ and the Japan Forces have given us. We’ve got to be in *and* out of Tokyo Airspace in that time, don’t forget, sir.”

The man he was speaking to, one Shesto Ackerman, was rubbing the back of his own neck with his fingers. He was in the cramped quarters of the chopper’s loading bay was where the drone command post was located. To Shesto, a former Green Beret and elite soldier, this work was a pain in the neck, both metaphorically and literally.

“Command to Ackerman Company. Verifying orders. Your objective is to capture dead or alive the five hIE that escaped in the aftermath of the recent explosion. The research center’s civilians have finished evacuating to the designated shelter.”

It was an unorthodox order, to say the least.

hIE weren’t supposed to *escape*. They may have looked identical to humans, but their actions were determined almost entirely by external stimuli. A specialist program on the Net utilized a huge databank to determine an hIE’s best appropriate action at any given moment. In other words, they were basically sophisticated remote-controlled puppets.

Memeframe was a leading hIE behaviour management cloud platform company. In other words, Shesto’s company was being asked by the puppet master to go round up its stray puppets.

The helicopter’s blades rotated quietly, so as not to be detected even in the calm of night, and the chopper closed in, maintaining a fixed altitude.

The rapid-response scramble team on board consisted of three men: Sergeant Toma Ryu in the pilot’s seat, Sergeant Major Yusuf Marai as the comms and ops

man, and the squadron leader, Second Lieutenant Shesto Ackerman. None of them commented on the unusual nature of the mission. They were, after all, seasoned professionals.

Shesto engaged his cranial-implant transmitter to contact Strategic Command. "We're in place, Major. Engaging sensors to track the targets."

The helicopter's heat sensors zoned in on five human-shaped objects heading towards TBRA-1. A datalink was established so that Strategic Command's AI could calculate an optimal strategy.

Soon, Strategic Command AI---who was responsible for all HOO battle orders---came up with a plan. Let the hIE cross the bridge and enter the Odaiba residential district.

Shesto folded his muscular arms and murmured, "That's pretty extreme."

Strategic Command was effectively suggesting urban warfare in a built-up residential district. The strategy of last resort when it came to warfare involving unmanned units.

Computer-regulated units were hard-wired to be unable to attack humans on their own judgement---those orders were the sole prerogative of their human owner. A drone that wandered into a crowd of people therefore found itself at a distinct disadvantage, as much of its functionality was temporarily disabled.

The image of a woman wearing a beret and eye-patch appeared in Shesto's retina display.

*-We're turning down Strategic Command AI's sensitivity a notch. The client's scramble order has caused it to infer an unusually high threat level from the targets.*

The message came from his commanding officer, Major Cordenne Lumière, a quiet enigma of a woman. Shesto knew almost nothing about her.

"Major, do we follow the AI's plan?" Shesto asked. He was unflappable in the face of danger. His was a mindset honed by sixteen straight years in the army, joined at the tender age of eighteen. These days he was tasked with bigger



weapons and he had risen through the ranks to Second Lieutenant, his outlook was still the same: that of a solid, loyal footsoldier.

*-That's a negative. I'm overruling the proposed plan. Police vehicles are already mustering to close off the bridge. It's unrealistic to expect to lure the targets into the residential district at this time.*

The major's decision was not made on humanitarian grounds. She was simply trying to avoid using the bridge as a battleground. Drones couldn't be used underwater---the radio waves necessary to control them couldn't penetrate far enough into liquid. As the HOO emergency response unit consisted entirely of drones, if the targets fell off the bridge they would be out of reach.

"What's the back-up plan then, Major?"

*-Our client has secured governmental authorization for the use of heavy-duty firepower. TBRA-2 is a research town, so its night-time population should be negligible. That's where you engage them.*

The list of authorized equipment came through. It was total overkill for the simple task of capturing five hIE. Sure, Japan was no longer infected with the pacifist mentality that had plagued its citizens a hundred years ago, but the weapons on the list were not the sort that any rational person would even think of bandying around in the vicinity of a residential district. There was a huge dissonance between the task at hand and the equipment authorized to accomplish it. Which could only mean one thing: there was a big hole in the data somewhere.

"Yusuf, what has the client given us?"

The Afro-French comms operative tapped at the keys on his console with his bony, supple fingers. "The escaped hIE are all female-type. Each one is equipped with their own unique device. That's all we have for now, suh. Man, if this is what passes for 'data' then why bother with intel at all?"

Shesto simply focused on the timer that was steadily counting down. Five minutes of their allotted Tokyo Airspace time had already passed.

“Lower the container,” he said. “We can deploy the land units while the Major does her negotiating.”

The research town had hardly any residences; the roads were straight and wide. The client wasn't even permitting emergency vehicles such as fire trucks or ambulances to enter the area.

The helicopter descended to a height of 20 metres above ground level and dropped its cargo onto the deserted white-lit road below. Just as it was about to crash onto the ground, the container---about twice the size of a standard shipping palette---emitted a violent eruption of gas to slow its trajectory so that it could safely discharge its contents onto the ground.

Its contents being two squadrons of drones: unmanned mechanized units. The first squad was the PMC's own, consisting of a US-standard 11 units. The second squad, on the other hand, was made up of 22 units, each fully loaded with heavy-duty military firearms, easily enough to turn a small district such as Odaiba into sea of flame.

The container's built-in AI put in an automatic request to the helicopter for sensor units. This was promptly granted, and the parent unit was lowered, and from it sprang 64 disposable camera units, which dispersed like so many winged insects to start recording images of the surrounding areas.

64 new palm-sized screens popped up in the 3D monitor of the drone command post in the chopper loading bay.

After it was determined that there were no human-shaped objects showing in any of the screens, an all-clear message flashed up.

The Second Tokyo Bay Reclaimed Archipelago was originally known as the Central Breakwater and Reclamation Disposal Site, as it was the final resting place of much of the rubble resulting from the Hazard. As such, it suffered from “desirability issues”, and never really caught on as a residential district.

The image detection systems on five of the cameras activated at once. These images were automatically enlarged and slid over to center screen.

"We've got them in the target capture sensors, suh," said Yusuf.

Shesto, who had steadfastly played his part in so many battle plans over the years, now found himself in battle.

But he had forgotten the plan.

He was staring at the things that had wandered into the night vista. The five different colors of lights. The five beautiful women, each one a distinct work of art.

"These would be the special units in question, suh," said Yusuf, zooming in on his monitor. The hIEs in the picture wore shimmering bodysuits of red, green, yellow and orange, and some of them carried what appeared to be bizarre oversized devices of some description.

A squadron of battle drones erupted from the rectangular drop container, entering the fray. Shesto looked up from the screens to watch the troops as they dispersed across the battlefield. The drones, each one a full two meters tall, quickly found places to take cover, using the features of the terrain to maximum effect. Behind the lines staked out by the humanoid drones, unmanned wheeled vehicles decked with heavy artillery took up their positions, ready for the hunt. In the vanguard were auto-levitating SmartMines.

The PMC's behaviour management cloud orchestrated the complex movements of the drones like a puppet-master his marionettes. hIEs were designed to help humans and military drones to hurt them, but the underlying operating principles were the same. Neither needed a heart or soul to operate efficiently---they just needed to act as they were designed to act.

"Once they've closed in to less than 70 meters, hit them with two blasts of the SmartMines. Have the artillery drones concentrate their fire on the closest units, and target them one by one. The frontline troops should fire to hold our positions. After that, we respond according to the enemy's actions." Shesto's orders entirely consistent with his humble infantryman origins: blunt, direct, to the point. The control cloud registered his orders and immediately set about processing and relaying them to the drones down below.

The unmanned troops moved with ordered precision, gathering and relaying data as they closed in on their targets.

*And then...*

One of the hIE's, a girl-type who wore her red hair in pigtails, looked up straight into the cameras and *grinned*.

She started running, making a beeline for their helicopter. Their helicopter, that was supposed to be silent, dark, hidden, undetectable, on full stealth mode.

Goosebumps appeared on Shesto's thick arms. It was an instinctive reaction: *keep that thing away from us*. "Toma," he barked, "bring the chopper back, away from that red thing! All troops to focus on keeping enemy units out of our battle lines!"

And just like that the battle had begun.

The drones that formed the front line of defense opened fire on the hIEs. The sound of gunfire rent the night air, and sky was lit up like a firework display.

Yusuf was tapping away at the keys in silent concentration. He was the epitome of the modern professional soldier: *stay calm under pressure, become a machine, and you might just live to fight another day*.

The helicopter pilot Sergeant Toma, on the other hand, couldn't keep his surprise hidden. "How can this be happening, Lieutenant? Our 50-caliber shells are just bouncing off the target!"

The wheeled armored vehicles were spewing forth a constant stream of bullets, but the redhead continued charging towards them, using her giant blade-like device as a shield. Each individual bullet was easily powerful enough to pierce through 5-millimeter steel plate, but the girl-shaped hIE seemed completely untroubled by the thousand-bullet hailstorm that was raining right at her.

"Squadrons One through Three, focus your firepower on that red thing's body. The remaining four squadrons, direct full suppressing fire toward the other four hIEs."

One of the floating SmartMines triggered, and flames burst forth like a flower in bloom. The monitors flared white, as the infrared sensors that fed them went haywire on the sudden heat surge.

*But there was no sound of gunfire.*

An alarm went off and a warning appeared on the monitors. All four of the wheeled drones were down, immobilized by internal short circuits. Just like that, Shesto had lost his primary source of firepower.

"Bring them back online!" Shesto ordered.

"The system can't identify the fault, suh," said Yusuf. And now even his deft fingerwork had stopped. The air was thick with tension. These drones were foolproof, designed to work in the deepest Amazonian jungles if necessary. It was *inconceivable* that four of them would fail at once...

"Shesto to Strategic Command. We've taken some sort of hit from the enemy. Requesting analysis of the enemy's weapons."

The AI of Strategic Command was informed by a mass of battle data from the ages, and every conceivable scenario was supposed to be accounted for when analysing and informing its decision-making. Yet the only answer that came back was *Judgement Pending*. After that, only silence. Shesto gulped. This was a *weird* situation.

Sergeat Toma twisted round from the pilot seat. "Sheesh. Look at all those flowers everywhere, Lieutenant? What is this? Is Memeframe some sort of florist, now?" As far as banter went it was weak, but it did help Shesto snap out of his lull.

As if to recover for lost time, Shesto scanned the monitors for any signs of danger. He saw that the road below---paved with recycled material, like so much else on the island---was covered with scattered flowers of all colors of the rainbow.

The red-haired girl, whose progress had been temporarily hampered by the heavy fire of the armored vehicle drones, was now able to move freely again. The oversized blade that she wielded was giving off a harsh red glow.

*Now, if that was me, Shesto wondered, what would I do next?*

The girl (*was it right to think of her as that?*) had been at the epicenter of the mine blast, but she (*was she the correct pronoun?*) was seemingly unhurt. In fact, she was smiling broadly, as if she were enjoying herself.

“She’s gonna go for the container!” Shest roared, and indeed, just as he shouted the warning, the red light turned towards the drop container that the drones had emerged from only a few moments ago.

A thin beam of light cut through the darkness. It pierced the center of the container and disappeared into the empty sky.

The container was designed to withstand even a full frontal blast from the railgun of a main battle tank. And yet its armored walls warped around the holes created by the extreme heat of the blast.

The battle command screen in the helicopter now displayed over 20 different warning messages. The drop container served a dual purpose: not just for transport, but also to act as a hub to relay battle data back to Central Command. Suddenly, the puppeteer was no longer in full control of his marionettes. The drones’ virtual puppet strings had slackened.

Just as they received this decisive blow, Central Command’s AI finally responded to Shesto’s earlier request for information. The drones were most likely short circuited by electrical current diverted from the underground high-voltage lines used to power the island’s research facilities.

TBRA-2’s high voltage cables were housed in utility ducts that were buried over 10 meters underground. The targets must have been party to this information, and also somehow had the means to draw on this current and utilize it as a weapon.

A transmission arrived from Major Lumière. Her expression was as blank as ever, although it was clear that she had been using the fact of the casualties as a bargaining chip in her negotiations with the client.

*-The client has released some data on the targets. Don’t try and take down them all down at once. Just focus on whichever one seems the easiest.*

Information poured in on the projector screen. "Yusuf, digest that text. I want to keep my eyes peeled on the battlefield below," Shesto said.

To his eyes, the battle could only go one way from here. That was his individual assessment, though. There had been no orders for retreat. He used the encrypted line to put in an official request to retreat.

***Denied.***

Shesto ordered the remaining drones to fall back and regroup.

His retina display now showed a concise summary of the new data from Yusuf. *Lacia-class humanoid Interface Elements. No information on their intended utility. The devices that they carry are equipped with quantum computers. They are able to make complex decisions independent of network support.*

On his retina display, next to a picture of the redhead who destroyed the drop container:

***Type-001 Code <Kouka>.***

Meanwhile down below, the real was illuminated by firelight, brandishing her giant blade/cannon hybrid device, and laughing gleefully.

***Type-002 Code <Snowdrop>.***

This was the little girl down below in the white dress who was now sitting on top of one of the immobilized drones, using its corpse as a cushion. Her white dress was decorated with glowing emerald-green ornaments of some sort, and she was surrounded by an unseasonal field of flowers that was as lush as it was out of place.

***Type-003 Code <Saturnus>.***

corresponded to a flaxen-haired beauty who seemed to be turning the handle on what looked like a giant spinning-wheel embedded in the ground.

***Type-004 Code <--->.***

Only a shadowy blur could be captured by the realtime monitor. But there was



something there, an orange emission of light, dancing in between the drones that didn't even have time to react before they collapsed into broken piles of scrap.

*Type-005 Code <Lacia>.*

The last of the units was a girl on the brink of womanhood. Her face had a transparent, innocent expression about it. Her slender hands held aloft what looked like a black coffin which seemed to stop all bullets that came her way. Then a fissure ran down the coffin and there was an explosion of white-blue light--

-

The operations monitor went instantly blank. Just like that, the battle management systems were all down. The helicopter suddenly found itself knocked out of stealth mode, swaying from side to side in the violent air currents. The sound of the rotor echoed all around the night sky, as if someone had switched on a giant blender.

Inside the chopper Shesto had to hold on to the terminal to steady himself. "Yusuf, what the hell is going on? Bring the network back up!"

All the screens that had been showing the battlefield were blank. By the time the 3D monitor recovered, it no longer showed a battlefield, but rather the aftermath of a battle.

"Our comms link with Memeframe was somehow hacked and used to take down our systems, suh. By somebody. Or something. I can't get the link back up."

"A cyber attack, huh?" Shesto said. Wireless communications were the lifeblood of remote drone warfare. If those---*girls*---had somehow been able to decipher the military-grade encryption used by Strategic Command and hack into their systems, then they truly were dangerous monsters.

No trace of the girls remained, of course. Strategic Command posited that they had most likely all jumped into the surrounding sea.

The dreaded worst-case scenario had come to pass. Ordinary drones were useless underwater, immobilized once they were out of range of the radio waves

used to control them. But the five escapees could operate perfectly well without any network connection.

The sea, then, was a safe escape route. How to try and pick up the chase when Tokyo had such a huge bay---and when Japan was surrounded by ocean on all sides? All hope of pursuit was now hopeless.

If Sergeant Toma Ryu had been laughing sardonically before, he certainly wasn't any more. And Sergeant Major Yusuf Marai's tapping fingers were now still.

Ten minutes of their Tokyo Airspace clearance still remained. From his helicopter that had not the slightest provision for underwater battle or pursuit, Shesto simply gazed down below at the vast expanse of blackness that was the sea.

"What the hell did we just let escape?" he murmured.

The objects that the men had encountered were far greater than anything they had imagined. *Unique*, even. The reality of the situation started to dawn on them, and they found themselves drenched with sweat, just like way back when they were rookies.

There is a certain sensation that a veteran soldier feels when presented with an new developments in weaponry. No matter how unscalable the wall seems to be, no matter firm the line in the sand is, mankind always finds a way to cross it and *progress*, blithely, and with impunity. Why? Because after progress comes feeling, comes *sensation*. Take the atom bomb. Sure, plenty of scientists were ready with an epigram to condemn it, in public. But the reality was that there were plenty of people who were overjoyed by its completion and the results it had on the battlefield. Why? Because when you used the atomic bomb, it meant that your brothers in arms, your fellow soldiers and countrymen wouldn't have to die fighting that war. A soldier might not be able to articulate this in so many words, but the visceral feeling is there.

Shesto stared at the sea, where those hIE, those works of art, had escaped. Then he looked up at the night vista of the Tokyo metropolis, when countless

millions of other hIE worked. It occurred to Shesto that this era had forsaken hard scientific reason for idle creature comforts. The change, the evolution, had already happened. Shesto shuddered.

He didn't even know what abilities the escaped hIEs possessed, or what they were capable of doing.

The blame for letting them escape could be placed firmly with the client Memeframe, of course. Memeframe were the ones who had insisted on withholding crucial details until it was too late, thereby hamstringing any serious chances of a recovery effort. But Shesto had a feeling that the time for playing the blame game was already passed, that there were bigger issues at stake. After all, one of the five units had casually used a device that unleashed more firepower than the average tank. What sort of devices could the other units control?

Chemical weapons? Biological? *Nuclear?*

Perhaps Shesto and his colleagues were nothing more than the first witnesses to an impending catastrophic breakdown of human society.

## Phase 2



*22:30.*

Arato was giving his younger sister Yuka a lecture.

The subject of this lecture was her eating habits. Specifically, her habit of stealing and eating the food that he was trying to use to prepare a meal.

“What do you mean, ‘just picking at it’? How can you call that ‘just picking’? There’s nothing left to pick*a!*”

For all practical purposes the Endo household consisted of Arato and Yuka. Their father was so busy with work that he only returned home once in a blue moon, and their mother had left them when Arato was young.

That was why Arato had always looked out for Yuka. And that was why, in doing so, he had created something of a monster.

“Just tell me one thing, Yuka. Just tell me this. What was going through your head while you were watching me prepare dinner?”

“Mmm, meat, nom nom nom nom!” said Yuka.

“What are you, some kind of wild animal?”

At 14 years of age Yuka was actually only three years younger than Arato, not that you would know it from her carefree demeanor. “Yeah, well, like, maybe dinner shouldn’t have been so late,” she said, nonchalantly. She pressed a button on the remote and the Holovision TV cut away from the game that she had been playing to a news report. “Whoa, look at that, there’s been some kind of explosion!”

A 3D image of a building erupted out of the dining room floor, ablaze in a virtual inferno.

The images came from just 30 minutes ago, the report said.

“Second Tokyo Bay Reclaimed Archipelago... well, at least that’s not around here,” Yuka said.

“What are you talking about? TBRA-2? It’s not that far at all!” Arato said.

Yuka used the remote to switch over to voice command, and asked the question. The answer came back immediately: the explosion was only 15 kilometers away from their apartment block, as the crow flies.

“Wow, it really isn’t too far. Totes massive news!” Yuka said. The holographic projection gave a rumbling boom. “Hey! That’s an idea! Maybe we’ll get a day off school tomorrow! That’d be ubercool!”

“Don’t count on it, kid,” said Arato.

“Yeah, I guess not. Well, whatever. I hope no one was hurt, anyway.”

That was something, at least, thought Arato. Yuka may not have been the sharpest tool in the box when it came to her academics, but she was a good kid at heart, and that wasn’t just his brotherly bias speaking.

Yuka had zoned out completely and was slouched out on the sofa, so he decided to leave her to it and try and salvage what he could of the dinner.

Not that it was exactly much of a dinner to begin with. All he was doing was throwing together a few frozen ingredients into a pan and adding seasoning. Sweet-and-sour pork, that's what he had been planning on making, but as Yuka had basically just eaten all the meat the moment he turned his back, it was now just *sweet-and-sour*. Ah, well. He'd just stick on some rice and then they could pour the sauce and vegetables on top, it'd be something, at least.

"Hey, *Onii-chan*, they said it was some robot company," Yuka said. "Maybe we could get ourselves, like, Saturday jobs and buy one of their robots or something. You know, to cook for us and stuff."

"Shoot, we're out of rice. Fried noodles it is, then."

"No way, that's so lame! Not two days running! Come on, *Onii-chan*, let's at least have some proper rice for once..."

"I told you, we're out. What do you want me to do, go out and get some at this hour?"

It had been a rhetorical question, but Yuka perked up and swung round towards her brother with an impish grin.

If food and play was what it took to make you strong, then truly the force was strong in this one.

"Oh, and *Onii-chan*, while you're out, could you get some ice-cream? Pretty please? A widdle ice-cream for widdle me?"

*Ah, the youngest-born child. Truly a force to be reckoned with.* Yuka wasn't so much spoiled as unashamedly and unabashedly *entitled*.

"Wait a second, how did we suddenly get to 'while you're out'?" Arato asked. But he soon wilted under the full might of his sister's innocent smile.

"*Onii-chan*, have I told you lately how much I *luuuuve* you?" she asked, going in for the kill.

"Huh, you think I can be bought that cheaply? That's all it takes to make me go scurrying out on some late-night errand for you?" His tone was gruff, but he was

already moving towards the vestibule and putting on a jacket in anticipation of the late-night chill.

“But you *are* scurrying out, right?” She grinned.

He was, of course, but he was proud enough to want to make it seem as if he had his own perfectly good set of reasons for going. “Well, what with all these explosions going on it might not be safe for a girl to be out on her own, so I suppose I’d better go for you...”

Yuka clapped her hands together and giggled in glee. “Totes score! Here’s hoping that every day is explosion day!”

“Yeah, and never mind the poor innocent bystander, I suppose,” Arato grumbled, but she was his little sister, and as her brother he couldn’t help but love her. He said goodbye—as Yuka barely made the effort to rise from the couch to see him off—and he set out into the night.

It was always a nice feeling to ask something of someone and have your request granted. So Arato wanted his sister to have that feeling.

You could even say he lived to serve her.

The district where they lived, Shin-Koiwa, was part of the Tokyo Bay Regeneration Project, and because it was the place where the coastal train lines and the inland lines intersected, it was an important regional hub.

The Endo apartment was located in a well-connected residential district just south of the station following the Urayasu Subway Line. Most people preferred to live a little way away from the actual coast, though, so by the time it got this late the streets were usually deserted.

“Talking of explosions, I hope everything’s OK,” Arato said to himself. Having brought up the subject again with his sister, he now found himself dwelling on it. Also, TBRA-2. His father used to work for a company there...

It was a ten-minute walk to the food store. Arato wanted to keep these creeping anxieties at bay, so he took his PortaCom out from his pocket to listen to some music in an effort to distract himself.



**“Out for some late-night shopping, young man?” A middle-aged woman who had been walking ahead of Arato called out to him as he passed her.**

**It was Ms. Marie, who looked like a plump woman maybe in her late forties, but was in fact an hIE owned by the Yuzawas, a local landowning family. Arato had seen her around since he had been a kid, so she had been operating for well over a decade, and was practically an antique.**

**“You too, Ms. Marie?”**

**“Yep, we’re all out of supplies.”**

**It felt good to walk in the night. Arato exchanged pleasantries with Ms. Marie, and before long they had arrived at their destination, a small grocery store. Arato bought the usual frozen rice and an ice-cream pot.**

**When he left the store it was raining flowers.**

**“What on earth...”**

**Five different colors of flower petals were falling from the sky, like rain, or perhaps snow. As it was April, and the season, Arato’s first thought was cherry blossoms, but then he took one of the petals in his hands and noticed that it was long and thin, closer to chrysanthemum than cherry. The petal also felt strangely dry to the touch, as if it had sucked all the humidity out of the surrounding air.**

**Arato had no idea what was going on, and although the scene was undeniably beautiful, he was also a little freaked out by it.**

**Still, he had to get home, or the ice-cream would melt.**

**“Oh, goodness, what’s happening here?” Ms. Marie had just emerged from the shop calmly and quietly, shopping bag in tow. Then, presumably deciding that this strange turn of events posed no actual threat, she plunged into the fray, flowers splashing around her.**

**The hIE disappeared into the night, not even bothering to brush away the petals that were settling on her hair. Her steady footsteps started to fade away.**

**Arato followed after her, using his spare hand to swat away the flowers as best he could.**

He soon caught up to Ms. Marie, or rather her ample rear, which was frozen in place in an unnatural position.

Arato was about to call out to her when he noticed that her knees were wobbling and jerking. It was almost as if she had forgotten how to walk.

Then her entire body started shaking, as if she was about to explode from within. Her neck juddered and her head creaked round a full 180 degrees, revealing an expressionless face under her medium-length loose hair.

The hIE dropped her shopping bag. Then, with her joints still poised at bizarre unnatural angles, she collapsed with a keening noise.

The technicolor flower petals kept on pouring down.

Arato felt something touch his neck, and his hand darted up reflexively to grab the thing that had made contact. He held up his catch under the streetlight to get a better look.

It was one of the colored petals, sprouting multiple, tiny little legs, like a centipede, and as it was scuttering around on Arato's palm.

Arato shrieked. The creature seemed about to burrow up inside his sleeve, and he shook it off with a wild, half-crazed gesture. His cry rent the night, but this was no time for worrying about disturbing the neighborhood.

"What the hell! What the hell!"

The five colors of flower petals by now carpeted the surrounding road and were milling around like insects. There was no way that this could be happening, Arato knew. And yet it was. He felt his grip on reality fade.

Arato realized that he was concerned about Ms. Marie. Then he remembered that she was an hIE, not a person. But even though she wasn't a real person, he couldn't just turn his back on her and leave her to her fate. She looked too much like a person for that.

Without any warning a sedan car that had been parked nearby charged towards Arato, tires screeching, lights suddenly on full beam. Arato had to jump out of its

path, and he landed clumsily on his arm. A jolt of pain thudded out from his shoulder.

He tried to gather himself up, and realized that the ice-cream he had just bought for his sister had rolled out of the bag and on to the ground. He grabbed it reflexively and shoved it back into the bag.

Arato propped himself up against the wall at the side of the road. Then the car, the one that seemed to have sped off past him, was suddenly reversing at full speed, on a beeline right back towards him.

Arato dodged, or tried his best, but it wasn't quite enough, and he felt a sharp blow on his hip.

As the car swung by Arato caught a glimpse inside the car. In the driver's seat, where there should have been a person, there was a swirling mass of flower petals.

"Give me a break..." Arato moaned.

The torrent of flowers rained down, unabated.

The whole scene was completely... *illogical*. Arato's first thoughts were that he was going crazy, but a quick check of all his other senses suggested that no, this was reality, it was really happening. So if this was reality, what had he been experiencing *before* this? Were all his memories just some sort of illusion? All he knew for certain was that now he was in pain, scared, and that his heart was trembling as he was fighting for his life.

Frozen foods spilled out of the shopping bag that Ms. Marie had dropped. A mass of petals crystallized into a flower on top of one of the packets of food, and Arato could hear the scurrying of tiny legs underneath it.

Then Arato became aware of a black shadow behind him cast by a streetlight. He heard a dull creaking and the sound of footsteps. Arato was still crouched down, looking at the ground, trying to recover his breath, but he could tell from the shadow that the figure behind him was wearing the same sort of clothing as Ms. Marie.

When the flowers swarmed round something, did they transform into a monster that was out to destroy all humans or something?

White smoke was now billowing forth from the underside of the car that had crashed into the wall, and clumps of flowers seemed to be sprouting from its chassis.

If this had been no more than a bad dream, Arato could have just woken up. But this was reality. There was no prospect of a gentle awakening at the nightmare, only more pain.

After what seemed like an age, the immediate danger seemed to have receded, and Arato wiped his brow.

Perhaps too soon, though, for the car erupted into flames. The inferno transfixed Arato, who could only stare at the hellish fire in front of him, a fire like the one in his dreams, except this time he knew that it was coming to get him for real, and he knew it was the end, and he screamed, *help me, help me*, just like the little boy in his dreams had done and did and always would.

When he opened his eyes he thought he caught a glimpse of a silhouette of a person.

Then, emerging from the haze between the blazing car and Arato, a female figure, rear-view. It came out of nowhere. Her slender arms appeared to be carrying some sort of casket, which she proceeded to take apart and put back together again with unbelievable speed, turning it into a kind of hemispherical umbrella, which she raised up as a shield before planting herself firmly between Arato and the billowing heatwaves.

Then the explosion came. But she was between him and the nightmarish fire. Her slender, vulnerable figure.

After the blast and the terror was over, Arato found himself faced with a young woman whose hair was blowing in the traces of hot air still swirling around the scene.

The girl had pale purple hair. She turned around.

Arato was dumbstruck by her natural beauty. She was completely unadorned with makeup, and yet her pellucid skin and angelic features rendered him speechless.

"You requested help," the young woman said in a calm voice.

She was slightly shorter than Arato, but as she was casually holding up the large black device with one arm as if it were nothing, she somehow seemed to tower over him.

"Oh, yeah... thanks."

The umbrella-shaped device in the girl's hand transformed back into its original casket-like form.

The young woman, who seemed to Arato to be a bit older than him, opened her pale lips and spoke. "I am, Lacia, sir."

She was looking at him with her ice-blue eyes, and he knew what she wanted of him.

"I'm Arato. Arato Endo." His voice wavered, only to be expected as his body was still trembling with fear.

The girl's serene expression seemed to calm him a little, though. And he realized, again, properly, just how jaw-droppingly beautiful she was.

The girl who had just introduced herself as Lacia was wearing a figure-hugging black and white bodysuit. The heavy-looking black box that she carried so effortlessly was a clear testament to the fact that she was no human.

Arato took her empty hand in his right hand. "We need to run away now. These flowers really mess you up."

The petals were dancing around, stirred up by the hot air. Arato spotted the crumpled figure of Ms. Marie on the other side of the road, in a heap where the explosion had deposited her.

The flower-petals that had landed on the street and the walls seemed to be clustering together into flowers, much like polyps clumped together to form coral.

The whole of the surrounding cityscape was becoming buried in an eerily deathly flower-garden.

Arato's every instinct screamed out at him to run away. That fearful sensation of contact with these alien creatures came flooding back to him, and his whole body was drenched in clammy perspiration at the memory.

Lacia, though, stood her ground amidst the lush blossoms of death that had so easily manipulated the likes of Ms. Marie and the sedan car.

"Why do we need to run away, sir?" she asked.

Arato was pulling at her arm effortfully, but her slender frame didn't budge. Only Arato's face showed any signs of exertion. His heart was still palpitating, as it had been since the explosion.

Lacia, who had no human heart, asked him another question. "Are you afraid, sir?"

"Of course I'm afraid! We could be killed any moment!" Before he knew it, he was shouting. "Who in their right mind wouldn't be afraid!"

"Well, why not just overcome your fear?"

Lacia's words hit a nerve. Arato wasn't expecting a lecture from something that wasn't even human. *What the hell are you talking about*, he wanted to shout, but there was something about her feminine appearance that held him back.

"What would that achieve?" he eventually managed.

Flowers were all around them, now. Or perhaps better to say that he and the girl were surrounded by the enemy, now.

"If you don't stand and fight now, then when, sir?" she asked.

What sort of talk was this? It was all too much for Arato.

*Even so, she was beautiful, so beautiful.*

Then Arato had another thought. What if the explosion that had just occurred drew people out of their houses to investigate? What would happen to the people? He felt sick at the thought, and shuddered.

The demon-flowers had started sprouting on Lacia's pale purple hair. Her black casket also looked like it was adorned by a giant bouquet.

What could Arato do? Nothing. He was powerless, helpless. Tiny, legged petal-monsters were scurrying up her white skin...

Fear was driving Arato crazy. Still, he had to do something.

"Just... hold still for a second, will you..."

He gritted his teeth and stretched out his hand.

She lowered her head slightly. He quickly brushed at her light purple hair, using his bare hand to knock off as much of the garland of flowers that had accumulated. The petals scattered downwards.

He had done something to stave off the impending danger. He had helped her. His spirits rose.

"I guess I could do something to help, after all, when I put my mind to it."

She had rescued him, and now he had made a gesture in return.

She was an hIE of course, so would probably not perceive it in the same way. Even so, he felt content.

"Let's get out of here!" He pulled at Lacia's hand again, and this time she didn't resist. He perceived, with a jolt, the warmth coming from her hand. "You're an Interfacer, right, Ms. Lacia? Can't you contact the police or something?"

Now that Arato's head was a little clearer he noticed that the bizarre flower-storm was raining only on them. The rest of the night vista was seemingly untouched. As they ran, Arato looked back at the shop that he had recently emerged from, and he noticed that it too was unaffected. Even the flower petals that had already fallen seemed to be surging after them.

"Even if I were to contact the police, they don't have the capabilities to immobilize our enemy," Lacia said. She had no lungs, of course, so even though she was shouldering the massive black box, her breathing was unaffected by the fact that they were running, and she spoke calmly.



Even though Arato was running for his life, he couldn't help but feel elated. Probably because he was *holding hands* with Lacia as he ran.

They ran through the streets of the town, into the night. A familiar world, one so different from the nightmarish scene they had been part of up until a moment ago.

They ran this way and that, and Arato no longer even had a destination in mind. He just knew that he was running with this person—not even a person—and that all he knew about her was her name, and that he was running as fast as he could. And then, when he turned back to look at her, she flicked her hair back, and said:

“Mr. Arato. Do you trust me?”

Lacia was clearly no ordinary hIE. Perhaps she was somehow linked to this flower-storm incident.

“I trust you!” Arato proclaimed this loudly into the night, in spite of whatever misgivings he may have had. It just wouldn't have been right—wouldn't have been *cool*—to doubt her in any way.

He held her hand tightly as he ran back up the road that only a few minutes ago he had been walking down and talking with Ms. Marie. He realized that if he carried on at this rate it would be barely five minutes before he was back at his apartment where his sister was waiting.

Arato wavered for a moment, and as he did he felt a sharp blow that threw him sideways to the ground.

He yelled out in pain, and at the same moment a second car roared past his head.

Lacia had saved him from being run over. In doing so, she was now astride him as he lay sprawled out, face up, on the ground.

“Mr. Arato Endo. I have a request of you, sir.”

Up above, the white moon lit up the night sky.

Down below, Lacia looked straight into Arato's eyes with a serious expression on her face.

“Won't you please become my master?”

Arato realized that a warm dampness was seeping into his jacket from where Lacia's buttocks came in contact with Arato's belly as she straddled him. He realized that her entire body was wet, as if she had recently been soaked through. Droplets of water were falling from her hair too, dripping on to his jacket and pooling on top of him. Like tears.

"Master? You mean, like, *owning* you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. In my judgement, you are an appropriate person to become my first master," she said.

Arato had no idea how she came to that conclusion. Surely that was too big a decision to make while they were in the process of fleeing from mortal danger?

"Isn't that a bit hasty? I mean, what do you even know about me?"

For some reason, Arato thought of his sister and his friends, and suddenly he felt overwhelmed by the burden of this massive decision that suddenly now presented itself to him.

"Not much, except that you said you trusted me," she said.

Her damp body pressed on top of him, as if she was urging to make the right decision.

Lacia had saved him from the blast of the exploding car earlier. And he had chosen to stay with her, to suppress his first instinct to flee, so that he could stay with her to brush those weird flowers away from her.

"Okay, then," he said.

Even though she wasn't a human, and even though she was clearly stronger than he was, Arato wanted to protect her.

"Your assent is duly noted, sir. Accordingly, a binding contract of ownership will now come into effect." The beautiful girl placed a hand on Arato's shoulder. "There are no further actions that you need to take for me to exercise my powers. There is only one thing that I need to request of you."

He didn't really understand what she was saying. His gaze was fixed too intently on her lips.

**"I am just a tool, Master. A tool can not be responsible for what it does. As my master, you will have to accept responsibility on my behalf."**

**There was a bang, loud as thunder. The black casket that Lacia had planted into the ground was holding back the car that had somehow swung round and charged back towards them. The car's rear wheels were spinning and smoking. The black casket, though, was firmly anchored into the earth, and even though a luxury sedan had plowed into it a full force it held its place in the ground.**

**"I shall now proceed to verify your vital statistics, Master. Once verification is complete, please confirm your assent, twice."**

**Lacia took hold of Arato's right hand and guided it towards her. She brought his index finger up to her neck, to where a metal fitting broke up the skintight body suit. Like a lock in a door.**

**She inserted his finger into the hole on her neck.**

**"Mr. Arato Endo, you are being registered as the owner of the Lacia-class humanoid Interface Elements Type-005. The hIE and its Black Monolith device are both autonomous units, and as their new master you will be solely and fully responsibly for the consequences of their actions. Do you assent to this?"**

**"Sure," Arato answered.**

**The girl's hair bobble began emitting a turquoise light. "I shall now commence acquisition of my new master's life log. This log will be registered as a matter of public record and will be submitted to the courts automatically should a lawsuit be filed as a result of my actions. You will need to assent to this registration in order to fully unlock my capabilities."**

**"Sure," Arato answered again.**

**There was a whirr and a click, coming from the hip area of Lacia's suit, and some sort of metallic shackle had been loosened. A red light started flashing. A pale blue light poured forth from the black box.**

**Arato could hear the scurrying, pattering sound of the petals moving all around them. The blue light that illuminated the area showed that he and Lacia were now**

well and truly surrounded by the flowers. If they were indeed under attack, then by the act of stopping they had allowed their enemy to encircle them in preparation for a sustained bombardment.

The deadly flowers were raining down, now, but Lacia still seemed as unconcerned as ever as she spoke to Arato. "In order to neutralize the units that are attacking us, I would recommend that we shut down electromagnetic transmissions in the area, Master. In my judgement, this is likely to cause the minimum of collateral damage and cause the least inconvenience to wider society."

This was getting way too weird for Arato now. And from his prone position laying on the ground, out of the corner of his eye, he could see some sort of monster crawling his way, a grotesque agglomeration of a lamppost and various bits of debris, using Marie's body as the base, dragging it along by the skirt.

The thing was closing in on him, scraping along the ground, half-disintegrating and it moved, but held together by the flowers that surrounded it. This bizarre, almost beautiful object was nearing by the second.

"Do it! Just stop that thing!" Arato shouted.

"That's fine, Master, but please understand that using the metamaterials necessary for an omnidirectional barrage will block all electronic communications within the area. There is a real risk to any people in the area on life support." Lacia looked down at Arato, who was trying to cling on to her. Her eyes were deadly earnest. "You are the one who has to accept full responsibility for my actions, Master."

Arato was in no state to ponder the nuances and full implications of this statement. All he knew was that a grave responsibility was being placed on his shoulders.

"Master, I need a decision, please. Do you authorize an attack, accepting the responsibility of small but real chance that you will be putting people's lives at risk?"

She asked the question. He couldn't really comprehend the full phrase, but the enormity of the individual words—*responsibility, lives, risk*—jumped out at him. He was fit to burst.

*And yet. He had said he trusted her.*

"Do it!" He gave the order. She nodded.

The heavy black box anchored to the ground split open. Or rather, peeled open, in thin black layers, spinning and whirring, like some sort of metallic tree spreading its branches.

And then in the blink of an eye the whole world changed. The flower petals were gone, the nightmare was ended, and the city was as it always was.

"It's... all gone." Ararat said. He sat up in disbelief, looking around and surveying his surroundings. Even the sounds that had been closing in up until a moment ago had completely disappeared.

"Where did it all go?" Arato asked.

"It's quite simple, master. We coated the attacking units with a film of negative index metamaterials, and in doing so made them invisible to all frequencies within a specified bandwidth. This puts the units in a state of *de facto* quarantine from command signals and other radio waves, effectively neutralizing them."

"Erm, that's not all that simple to me..." Arato said. He placed his hand on the ground to prop himself up, and felt something dry under his palm. He gulped, pulling his hand away reflexively. Fighting back a rising wave of nausea, Arato forced himself to feel the spot again. Prodding tentatively, he discovered that there was a large quantity of invisible, soft things scattered around the surrounding ground.

The flower petals were all still there. The only difference was that Lacia had somehow made them invisible. Light passed through them, the signals that had been remotely controlling them no longer reached them, and they were completely immobile.

There must have been tens of thousands of them, at least, and yet they had all been taken out in an instant, just like that. Arato couldn't even begin to imagine how Lacia had pulled that stunt whilst remaining calmly seated on top of him.

Wind blew. A blizzard of invisible flowers pattered and scattered into the night.

Arato's body was trembling so much he thought his heart might give way at any moment. Arato was no genius, but he knew enough to realize that there was nothing ordinary about this girl. His animal instincts were telling him to flee, to get away from this overwhelmingly powerful creature.

"What is this thing? It's incredible..." His instincts were speaking to him. *Doubting. Fearing. She is danger.*

Lacia stood up, as if nothing had happened.

Arato looked up at her, and for a second he imagined that he was staring up at a giant wild beast that was towering over him.

The illusion subsided, and she was no longer terrifying, but rather she was beautiful again.

## Phase 3



Arato was working against the clock.

He had until his sister's ice-cream melted.

As he entered his apartment block, he asked Lacia how long had passed since they met. Eight minutes, was the answer. He heard a police siren somewhere in the distance.

Arato used his PortaCom to deactivate the electronic lock on his apartment door.

Yuka had evidently been waiting for him. "You took your time, *Onii-chan!*" she said, jumping up from the sofa and bounding towards the vestibule.

"Yeah, well, shopping can be pretty tough, sometimes." Arato pulled the pack of rice out of the shopping bag, checking it once over to make sure that none of the flower petals remained.

His sister was standing in front of him dumbstruck. She raised a quivering finger toward her brother.

"What... who... wha..." she mumbled.

"Hello, I'm Lacia. It is a pleasure to be of service, Ma'am," Lacia said.

The blood drained from Yuka's face as she contemplated the politely-bowing figure of Lacia. Arato was Lacia's owner now, so there was nothing particularly strange about an owner having his *possession* by his side. Unless the possession in question happened to look like a human being.

"OMG, it's finally happened. My brother bought himself a girl."

"Really, is that what you think of me? I didn't *pay* for her!"

"What? That's even worse!"

To be fair to Yuka, it is somewhat discombobulating when someone in your family goes out for a spot of late-night grocery shopping and comes back having acquired a girl.

It was not all that surprising, then, that she was on the verge of tears. "I'm so sorry, Ms Lacia, I will do everything I can to put this right, we will co-operate fully with the authorities. I'm almost certain that this is my brother's first offense!" Her head fell and she made a sobbing noise.

Arato moved to try and clear up the misunderstanding, but Lacia jumped in first, slicing through the tangled web in her usual calm demeanor. "I'm an hIE, not a human, so it's not an offense to bring me into a private residence. Also, I was without an owner when your brother kindly took me on, so the contract of ownership is completely legitimate."

"Clever things, aren't they, hIE? Better at explaining than I am, at least." All the tension Arato had felt only a few minutes ago seemed to have dissolved, and he had almost even forgotten about the attack on his person only a few minutes ago.

"For real?" Yuka asked, looking up. She had been crying. Arato was torn between feeling relieved that the misunderstanding was resolved and feeling hurt that she would seriously suspect him of kidnapping a girl.



"Anyhow," Arato said, "um, that brings us to an interesting point. Do you think Lacia could stay here with us? Miss Lacia, I mean." He corrected himself hastily, having embarrassed himself with his attempt with familiarity.

Arato's sister wiped her eyes. "I guess," she said.

"Are you sure?" Arato asked.

Yuka smiled—she hadn't taken long to recover her cheery demeanor. "Totes sure! Finders keepers, right?"

Arato felt that he should probably now tell Yuka the truth about what had just happened outside. He wanted to just bring Lacia inside and forget about the whole thing, of course, but that wouldn't do. He didn't want to put his sister in danger.

"Oh, yeah, Yuka. Just now. When I was out shopping. These flowers started pouring down on us. Ms. Marie's all bust up, you know, the hIE from the Yuzawas'. It could be because of this girl, she might be the real target. Just so you know."

Lacia had said that she didn't know who had been behind the attack. And Arato still felt like he had been sucked into some sort of parallel universe, so was still struggling to get his head around the events. He realized that his rambling attempt at explanation was somewhat convoluted, so he decided that show was better than tell, and he peeled his shirt open to show Yuka his bruises. "Look, here's where this car hit me. Lacia saved me from the worst of it, though."

"That's lucky. Good job she was there, right, *Onii-chan*?"

Well, yes, it *was* a good job Lacia had been there.

"Yeah. I didn't really do much myself," Arato said, dumbly.

"Anyway, I'm sure it's be fine, *Onii-chan*. There's, like, nothing about it on the news. And if you really thought it was so dangerous having Lacia around, you wouldn't have brought her back with you in the first place, right?"

Arato felt a gush of warmth inside him. His sister trusted him! She believed in him. Not the hIE that he had brought back, but *him*.

He wanted to thank her. But before the words formed in his mouth, Yuka reached out into his shopping bag and plucked out the ice-cream.

"So, you're one of us, now, Lacia," Yuka said. "I hear that hIE are, like, totes *amaze* at cooking! So what can you can do?"

Lacia answered without hesitation. "If you want me to make a meal I could use the commercial data from the behaviour management cloud and get started on something immediately, Ma'am?"

"Er, will it taste good?" Yuka asked.

"Five star ratings across the board from customers, Ma'am."

"*Luuuve* you, Lacia!" Yuka gave Lacia an impulsive, tight hug and then grabbed her hand to usher her into the house.

"Wait a second," Arato said. "Is that really all it takes to convince you? Someone to dangle food in your face?" Arato found that he was gripping on to Lacia's other hand, holding her back.

But in the end he was no match for his sister, who had been born with the gift of the gab. "You know that hIE have cameras in their eyes recording everything they see, right, *Onii-chan*? I saw it on TV. If Ms. Marie was there then it'll all be caught on tape. If there's some kind of problem the police'll, like, sort it all out, no?"

Arato and Lacia's adventures would have also been caught on tape by the apartment block cameras, and the grocery store's. If there really was some sort of ongoing problem then the police would surely be calling by sometime tomorrow.

"I guess you're right, Yuka. Yup, we'll leave it to the police to sort out." Arato started to think that maybe he had overreacted. Whoever it was that had made those flower-petals fall, it wasn't as if Arato was at war or anything. The very idea of him somehow being *involved* in something seemed absurd.

After all, it wasn't as if Lacia was going to be his forever. She was clearly special, something extraordinary, and there was no way she was going to become a permanent fixture in their slovenly, parentless apartment.

"Yep, you're always overthinking things, *Onii-chan*. Ask not what you can do to solve the world's problems, ask what the world can do to cook you a delicious meal."

"I bet you sleep well at night," Arato said. He was somewhat taken aback by how smoothly Yuka had accepted Lacia into her lives and maneuvered into a symbiotic relationship with her.

"Sure do, like a dead log. So, whacha gonna do now for luck, *Onii-chan*, now that you've used your lifetime's supply up with this *amaze* find?"

"Er, would you mind not writing me off just yet? Besides, what happens if it really does hit the fan?" Arato said.

"Well, why don't we just ask her? Lacia, will we be in any danger if you stay here with us?" Yuka asked bluntly.

"If what you've said is true, Miss Yuka, then I don't foresee any danger," Lacia answered.

Yuka nodded, satisfied. "See? It's ubercool."

Arato took heart from his sister's boldness. "OK. Well, if things start to heat up later we can worry about everything then, I guess. For now, Lacia needs a place to stay." Arato wasn't the sort to mull over difficult problems. His friends Ryu and Kengo had even upbraided him in the past for being too impulsive. "That's settled, then. Now, let's think about dinner."

"I believe I have a good grasp of the ingredients at my disposal, Master," Lacia said.

To cut to the chase: it was a first-class meal.

Lacia had somehow taken the food that Arato had started to prepare and turned it into a Chinese banquet fit for an emperor. Arato had no idea how she had done it. Neither had Yuka. All they could do was feel a little sheepish as they appreciatively wolfed down the fruits of Lacia's labor.

It had grown late, so after dinner Yuka headed straight for her bath, and then bed. Lacia had washed and dried the dishes, so there was nothing left for Arato to do.

"I feel guilty setting you straight to work as soon as you got here," Arato said.

Lacia was putting the dried dishes back into order. "Guilty, master? Why? hIE were mass-produced to be used as carers and domestic help. It's what we were designed for."

The black coffin-device was leant up against the wall in the living room. It was propped up on cushions so as not to damage the floor, and as a result the room looked different from its usual layout.

As Arato stared at Lacia's back he started to worry about the full implications of having picked up this incredible thing and brought it into his life. As he sat there on the sofa, watching her, he noticed how there was a portion of the back of her suit that exposed her bare skin.

He saw how pale and white her skin was. It was too much for Arato to take. He was feeling funny. The sleek black and white body suit just seemed so *out of place* in the humdrum domesticity of his kitchen. His body felt warm, and he collapsed sideways the sofa.

"Oh God, what am I going to do..." His pulse was racing.

He thought back to the moment he first laid his eyes on her, the rear silhouette of the figure that saved him.

Vivid memories flooded back to him. Her hand, soft in his hand as they ran away together. Her moonlit face. The feeling of her sitting on top of him as they solemnly concluded the contract of ownership. Arato was squirming inside, his chest ready burst open.

Arato lay on his side, and was in no state to sit up. He couldn't control this agitation inside him, and his face was flushing red and beads of sweat were forming all over his body. *Lacia is going to stay with me, in my home.* As he reassured himself of this fact, he reminded himself that she wasn't human. What should he do? What could he do?

"Damn, I'm such a loser..." Arato sighed. He had to move now, his head was feeling light, and he forced himself to spring up.

“Master, would you like me to retire for the evening?” It was Lacia, standing right by him. She was looking down at him, coolly regarding his red face. She was carrying a full tea set on a lacquered tray. Where had she managed to rustle that up from?

Arato found himself caught in an awkward half-sitting half-standing posture, and crept back down into a sitting position on the sofa.

Lacia knelt down and placed the tea-tray on a low table. She poured boiling water from the pot to cool it down before brewing. Neither Arato nor his sister had ever used the tea set, so her simple, elegant movements seemed somehow exotic.

“Wow, there’s all sorts of things you can do, huh?”

There was something exciting about having an hIE to perform mundane household chores, even the sort that Arato was somewhat used to doing himself.

He had studied something like this in his Social Studies class at high school. How social norms could easily change during the course of a generation. What passed for common sense during the economic boom years of the 1960s was completely outdated by the time you reached the stagnant years of the 2010s. A lot can change in the space of half a century, and a lot needed to change. But when you actually experienced the process of change for yourself step by step, day by day, you barely noticed it. And yet *progress happened*, pushing the world in new directions. Was this what was happening right now?

“Thank you, sir. Although all of an hIE’s actions are regulated by the control cloud that we are linked to. When I make tea like this, all I’m doing is basing my actions on images of the same actions performed by real humans, stored in the database.”

Arato smiled wryly when he realized that he was being lectured on human behaviour by something that only looked like a human. He remembered how his friend Ryo was so insistent that hIE were nothing more than objects.

Lacia seemed to pick up on Arato's reaction, and followed up quickly with, "I hope I don't offend you, Master, with my lengthy explanations. Only it seemed to me that you are somewhat unfamiliar with the basic principles by which hIE operate."

"Does it bother you that I'm unfamiliar with hIE, Lacia?"

Her response was a tolerant silence.

Arato didn't want to think about that time, not at all long ago, when he wasn't Lacia's owner, and that she could have belonged to anybody.

Then he felt the fear descend on him again. He may have decided to keep and look after Lacia for now, but that didn't mean he couldn't have second thoughts. Nobody would have blamed him if he wanted to bail.

"Where do you come from, Lacia?" he asked, eventually.

Lacia lifted the delicate teapot and poured into a small cup. "Is this something you want to know as my master so that our relationship can function better, sir?" she asked.

There was that sensation again, the one he had when he first met her. The need for trust. For reliance. The need to get *closer*.

"Well, when I think about it I don't really know anything about you, Lacia. The more I know now, the fewer unpleasant surprises there'll be in the future, you know? And it goes both ways, surely? The more we know about each other the less there'll be to worry about. It'll put my mind at rest, and yours too, I hope. That's what I figure, anyhow."

And if there was anything that Arato could do to help her... well, he wanted to do it. To do something *nice* for her.

Arato had practically poured his heart out to Lacia, at least by his standards. But if he was expecting a similar reaction, he was about to be disappointed.

Lacia just looked back at him calmly and spoke with a level tone. "You seem to be a good-hearted person, Master. But you also seem to be under a very basic

misapprehension.” Her pale blue eyes stared at him, unblinking. “You see, I don’t have a soul.”

This was definitely not the response Arato had been expecting. He may have been her owner, but he couldn’t find anything to say in response to this.

“It’s like this, Master. All my actions are really just responses to external stimuli. When a human speaks or acts, I just react accordingly. My actions are tailored to what the control cloud calculates is most likely to have the desired effect on the humans who I serve. I don’t have what you might call a consistent personality, as you would find in humans.”

Technology had advanced far enough that one no longer needed to *be* human to *act* human. If an object had the form and skeletal structure identical to those of a human, there was no reason for its actions not to be identical too. Even if it lacked a heart or a soul, there was no reason that it couldn’t pass as human, as long as it stuck to acting according to pre-programmed patterns. This was how hIE were able to fulfill their duties and perform their work.

“So you see, Master,” Lacia continued, “all you’ve been doing is observing the actions of this particular hIE, and then subconsciously ascribing motives to actions that are modeled on human behaviours.”

Arato’s mind boggled. He had been telling himself that he had *rescued* this girl. He felt let down, angry even, that there was such a crude and mechanistic explanation for what had been happening. He was also angry because he understood, on an intellectual level at least, that Lacia was absolutely right.

He was the one who had started imagining that the girl would somehow be feeling grateful for what he had done for her. This was exactly the sort of fuzzy thinking that his friends had warned him against. It was as if a fog had been lifted from his eyes. He could see clearly now, the bleak reality of his situation.

Human interactions were based on give-and-take, on empathy for the other’s viewpoint and needs and hopes and desires, based on that implicit understanding

that people wanted the same things, and that sometimes compromises were necessary.

But none of this applied with Lacia.

Arato started to wonder whether he would have bothered getting involved at all if Lacia had not looked like a fully-fledged human.

*Fear, regret, despair.* All these emotions swirled round inside him, rendering him speechless. He said nothing. His neck throbbed.

He had stared into the abyss and seen the void. His legs gave an involuntary shudder.

Lacia, the Lacia who didn't even have a heart, spoke again, as if despite Arato's actions. "I don't have a soul."

Arato looked up to the heavens.

*The bigger you are the harder you fall.* Arato realized that the reason he was feeling so let down, so betrayed, was because in his mind he had emotionally invested in something that never warranted it. *Right, let's start again, shall we?* Arato told himself. He went back to the same two stock images in his dreams: the fiery explosion, and the white dog wagging its tail. Arato relaxed a little as he exhaled audibly. He remembered how the younger version of himself was helped by the dog's actions, regardless of whether the dog was conscious of what he was doing or whether it had a motive. *Yes, Yes, I remember that. Let's start there.*

So, even if it was pointless, Arato was still determined that he would reach out. "Just because you have no soul doesn't mean you can't respond to someone else," he said.

Arato was annoyed at himself. As a child he hadn't perceived that white dog's soul, but that hadn't stopped him from taking heart at the way that the animal had joyfully wagged its tail as if it didn't have a care in the world.

"Yeah, that's right. What I felt back then was still real. It must have been."



The hopeless feeling that Arato had only a moment ago was suddenly dispelled, purged by a new, more positive emotion.

Arato knew that he had to act now, to put an end to this volatile cycle of conflicting emotions. He wasn't the thinking type, words weren't enough to express himself now. He had to *do* something.

His blood was pumping as he frantically tried to think what he could do for her. "Fine, Lacia. I get it, I had it all wrong. But is it really so hard to believe that in the fullness of time, you'll start to like it here? To feel at home, I mean?"

A silence descended between them. A silence that could never mean anything, given that she lacked both heart and soul.

Lacia smiled enigmatically. "Well, yes, Master. It *is* hard to believe. Because I don't have feelings."

*And yet he had wanted to do something nice for her!*

Arato knew that he was blushing bright red by now. "Damn, I'm such a loser!" he shouted, trying to rid himself of the humiliation and disappointment.

From down the corridor there was a thumping of footsteps. It was Yuka, in pajamas, carrying a pillow under one arm, with a face like death warmed up.

"Okay, *Onii-chan*, now *that's* established, do you think you could you shut up and let me get some sleep?"

Arato spent the night restless, but a new day still dawned.

The next morning, when he went to the living room, Lacia was already there. Not just there – she had also prepared a good breakfast for Arato and Yuka to see them on their way to school.

Time passed. Yuka was as lively as ever. Arato had his friends at school. His father was as busy with work as ever and didn't show his face at home. Lacia acted according to the movement data given to her by the control cloud, one precise action layered on top of another so that her actions seemed entirely, naturally human.

Such was Arato's life, his reality. Before he knew it, four days had passed.

Arato woke to the sound of an alarm. He stretched out an arm from under the blanket and reached for his PortaCom beeping under his pillow. Before he had the chance to press a button on the screen the PortaCom made the autonomous decision to connect him to the person giving him his morning call.

**-Your breakfast is nearly ready, Master. Would you care to rise?**

Lacia's crystalline voice made his ears tingle and his heart pound with excitement. Arato leapt out of bed. "What's for breakfast?" he asked.

He'd find out soon enough, of course. But he just wanted to hear her voice again.

**-I tried making French toast, sir. I remember you saying you wanted to try it sometime.**

Arato felt a surge of shame. He wondered whether he should really be allowing Lacia to pamper him so. He stood up and cradled his head. "Is this really normal, I wonder..." he said to himself, knowing full well that it wasn't.

He went to the dining room, where he found Yuka chowing down contentedly on a thick slice of golden brown French toast.

"Morning, Yuka."

"*Morgh...*" she replied, mouth full, fork gripped firmly in her hand ready to spear the next piece.

Lacia's arrival had brought a semblance of order back into Arato and Yuka's previously chaotic daily routine. A side effect of this was that both brother and sister were chronically tired as their body-clocks readjusted to normalcy.

"How are you feeling this morning, Master?"

Lacia no longer wore the black and white body suit that she had been wearing when they first met. Rather, under her kitchen apron she was dressed in everyday clothing. Arato's old clothing, to be precise. The device lock on her waist was also gone.

As a result, her outward appearance was completely indistinguishable from that of a real human. Arato realized that he had been staring, and quickly averted his gaze. He felt weird about the fact that she was wearing his jeans, his shirt.

"*Onii-chan*, enough with the leering!" Yuka had noticed him staring too. *Ugh*. He hated the idea that his sister thought he was leering, like some sort of animal in heat.

Arato stole a quick sideways glance at Lacia's face to check her reaction. She may not have been human, but he still couldn't bear the thought of her thinking badly of him. He needn't have worried. Her expression was as calm as ever.

"Er, no, I was just thinking we really should get some proper clothes for Lacia, that's all..." he sputtered.

Arato made for the refrigerator to get a drink, as a matter of habit, but then he stopped himself when he noticed the steaming teapot laid out on the table, all ready for him.

Once again he felt guilty that he was being waited on hand and foot. He quickly poured the tea himself, before Lacia had the chance to do it for him, so that he could at least do *something* for himself. He didn't remember there being any breakfast tea in the house. Lacia must have ordered some in. The cup steamed invitingly, exuding an invigorating aroma that competed with the crisp, savory smell wafting over from the hotplate where Lacia was flipping French toast with perfect precision.

Mornings were much less hectic since Lacia arrived. There was no longer a mad dash, and Arato had time to spare. He leisurely synced his PortaCom with the Holovision. The household management system took care of most of the day-to-day maintenance of the domestic appliances, but Arato still liked to check in to see if there was anything of note.

The 3D display showed status reports on the domestic appliances for Arato's attention. Mixed in with reports, though, was an email from a sender that he didn't recognize.

"Hey, there's an email here, is it for you, Yuka?" It was addressed to Yuka, but Arato was cc'ed in.

Yuka bolted upright. "Let's see, let's see!"

The holographic whiteboard displayed the name of the sender, which left Arato none the wiser.

He opened the file. His jaw dropped as he read it.

"Yuka. Sit down and talk to me."

"Er, I'm already sitting..."

"*What's* this about a modeling competition?"

There was a short message on the screen. **Dear Miss Yuka Endo. We are delighted to inform you that Lacia, the hIE you submitted for our consideration in our modeling competition, has been awarded First Prize.**

"Woohoo! First prize! That's totes amazing!"

Arato quickly pieced the pieces together. So, this media group had been looking for hIE models and had been holding open auditions, and Yuka must have uploaded Lacia's data and sent it in.

And a couple of days later this was the result.

Yuka clicked on the link, opening up the website for the competition. The results were displayed prominently, and there was already a heated discussing taking place in the comments.

"Look, *Onii-chan*, look! It's all happening! Ubercool!"

Who knows when or how they'd been taken, but the most prominent picture was of Lacia, dressed in what looked suspiciously like Yuka's school uniform.

There were also pictures of the other hIE finalists, but the one that Arato kept on coming back to was, unsurprisingly, the picture of Lacia.

Yuka squealed with joy. "See, Lacia, I *said* you were beautiful!"

Arato, meanwhile, did a double-take as he saw his own name displayed under Lacia's, as her registered owner.

"Er, Yuka, this competition's quite a big deal, right?" Arato asked.

“Yeah, isn't it great! There were commercials on TV and everything!”

In other words, Lacia was now in the media spotlight, big time.

Arato's head hurt. He thought about how he still hadn't heard anything more about that strange attack of the flowers a few days ago.

Yuka grinned at him. “So, *Onii-chan*, what do you have to say to your clever little sister now?”

“You...what the *hell* were you thinking?” Arato was shaking.

This was evidently not the reaction Yuka had been expecting, and her voice turned defensive. “What? Lacia's gorgeous! We can't keep her locked up here, it's a waste!”

“So you go and do a thing like this behind my back? *Use* her? Without asking me? Is *nothing* sacred with you?” Arato said, wearily.

Suddenly, subject of their conversation interjected. “If it's any help, Master, I really don't mind at all.”

“See!” Yuka said. “She doesn't mind, she says so herself! So what's the problem, spoilsport!”

“The problem is,” Arato shouted, “the problem is, well, an hIE isn't going to disobey you when you ask her to do something. She's designed to take orders!”

hIE are different from humans. *I don't have a soul*, Lacia had said. Her words were chosen specifically to respond to her human masters' desires and wishes.

Lacia deftly finished flipping the French toast onto a plate, and turned around to face Arato. “In any case, Master, what's done is done.”

The sound of the sizzling oil brought Arato's stomach to life. His body betrayed him – he wanted food, and he wanted it now.

Arato slumped in his chair, defeated. “But what are we gonna do about everything now?”

When they first met, Arato and Lacia had been attacked together. There may still have been an unknown enemy out there targeting Lacia. And the competition had now just broadcast her details to the entire world.

"Geez, I told you that all sorts of weird things happened that night, and we still haven't got to the bottom of all that. And now you want to pile *this* on top? Why not just shoot me already and be done with it!"

Yuka's face took on a serious expression. "*Onii-chan*, would you describe me the progressive sort?"

"Well, yeah, if by *progress* you mean leaping off a cliff without bothering to look over the edge first."

There was a giggling sound. But it didn't come from Yuka. Or Arato.

Lacia was laughing. She stood there, elegant in her apron, her hand half-covering her mouth, now but she had definitely laughed. And now she was smiling. It was the first time Arato had seen her look happy.

"So hIE can laugh, huh..."

Lacia's radiant expression at that moment looked every bit like it was heartfelt.

At that moment, Arato could not bring himself to believe that this object in front of him had no soul.

# Chapter 02 Analog Hack

## Phase I

Arato's morning routine was never the same after Lacia's arrival.

The epic battles with the alarm clock's snooze function were no more. These days, all it took to wake Arato from his sleep was the gentlest of nudges.

Arato threw on an old shirt and sweats, gave his face a quick wash, and made for the kitchen. The adjoining living room was not exactly a palace, but not too cramped for their modest household either. Arato pulled up a chair at the western-style dining table.

"Morning," he said, sitting down.

"Slept in, *Onii-chan*?" Yuka asked. She was savoring her cup of Japanese tea with a refined air, as if she was drinking from gold-plated fine china, rather than the Hello-Kitty-esque plastic receptacle that it was.

"You know that if you stick some sugar in that stuff you can fool yourself into thinking it's like English tea," Arato said.

"Really?" Yuka asked, skeptically.

"I believe that my master is speaking the truth," Lacia interjected. "And I believe that in places such as Thailand it's not uncommon to add sugar to your tea even when you are drinking it in the East Asian style, as you are now, Ma'am." Lacia had turned round from her spot in the kitchen, her pale purple hair flowing around as she spun. There was something about this sort of party trivia when it came from the mouth of a human-shaped android such as Lacia. It sounded somehow *impressive*. Profound, even.

Arato's chest tightened, snapping him out of his early morning reverie. Lacia may have been without a soul, but her expression was just perfect. He realized that he was holding his breath and that his face was flushing.

Yuka's face scrunched up in concentration. "If you both say so. Well, I guess I'll try it out!" She picked up the sugar bowl and somewhat incongruously heaped two generous teaspoons of sugar into her small Japanese-style teacup. Not wanting to use the sugar spoon to stir, and not having any other utensil to hand, she picked up one of her chopsticks and used it to mix in the sugar.

"Here you go, *Onii-chan!* A present for you!" She offered him the resulting sickly-sweet concoction.

"Er, why's it *my* job to taste it?" he asked.

Lacia brought over a tray loaded with their breakfast staples—white rice and miso soup. This gave Arato the opportunity to ignore Yuka's proffered beverage. "You've made your tea, now drink it. Your brother has bigger problems to worry about right now."

Arato clapped his hands together to give thanks for the food, and tried a mouthful of the miso soup. It had pieces of fried tofu in it, and heaps of fresh cabbage, an attempt to make up for the lack of vegetables in their diet before Lacia had joined their household. The soup tasted odd to Arato, not because there was anything wrong with it—it was delicious—but because it was such a homey dish, the sort that they never really had at home any more since their mother left them over 10 years ago.

"What problems? Daddy said we could keep Lacia, so everything's just fine and dandy!" Yuka grabbed the tube of flavored mayonnaise squeezed a generous dollop of it onto her rice. It was an acquired taste, but people who loved it, *loved* it.

Arato sighed. "Yeah, I know he said we could, but I doubt Pop knows what he's letting us in for." Yesterday evening, Arato had spoken to his father for the first time in days. Over his PortaCom of course, not in person. His father, who was supposed to be an expert researcher on hIE fundamentals, didn't seem to know



anything about Lacia, and had no idea what to make of her strange black device or the rest of her unusual equipment. Neither could he explain the incident of the strange flowers, or what happened to Ms. Marie.

"I was surprised at how quick Daddy was to agree to take Lacia in," Yuka admitted.

"I wasn't," Arato said, a little disgruntled. He had recognized the look on his father's face when his father had caught sight of Lacia over the PortaCom. It was uncomfortably close to Arato's own face when he looked at Lacia, he knew. It wasn't a happy thought.

Speaking of unhappy thoughts, Arato said out loud, "Come to think of it, there hasn't been anything about that night in the news yet, has there? And there's nothing from the police, either." He was surprised—a large car had exploded on a public road, after all—but when Arato had asked around he wasn't able to glean much from his neighbors, other than the fact that when a couple of them had tried to go outside to see what was happening they found that the locks on their doors and windows wouldn't open for a couple of minutes, and they were temporarily locked in their houses. Nor could Arato find any physical traces of the massive flower-storm left anywhere in the neighborhood.

"*Onii-chan*, you haven't introduced Lacia to your friends Kengo or Ryo yet, have you?" Yuka asked.

"Ah. No. That's something." Arato had been buddies with Ryo since he was a boy, and Kengo had joined their little group at the beginning of high school, but Arato still hadn't mentioned the latest arrival in his life to his two closest friends. The way he saw it, he already had enough to worry about.

Yuka was never one for standing on ceremony when it came to table manners, and she was tapping away at the table as she ate her breakfast nonchalantly. The table top also doubled as a touch-screen computer, and Yuka had brought up some fashion magazine which she was casually browsing, through the gaps

between the rice and soup bowls. Had Arato not known Yuka better he would have been surprised at the oddness of the scene.

By the by Yuka seemed to find what she was looking for, and she grinned as she zoomed in on the article she had found:

**First Prize in the Fabion Media Group's hIE Modeling Competition goes to Lacia.**

Accompanying the headline, of course, was yet another picture of Lacia. It seemed that the competition was an even bigger deal that Arato had first feared. It was all spiraling out of control.

"Lacia, your first job is on Sunday, isn't it?" Yuka asked.

"Seriously, though, what are we gonna do about this," Arato said.

"Come on, *Onii-chan*, sometimes you gotta just grab life by the balls, you know? This is our chance to make it big! You only got one shot, do not miss your-"

"What are you, some sort of 20th-Century rapper?" Arato cut in.

Lacia herself was completely unruffled by the commotion surrounding her, of course. She merely looked on, observing the scene, silently deciding on what action to take next. What she should say to assuage her owner's worries. Her own feelings simply weren't a factor.

"Please, Master, there really is no need to worry on my account."

"Yeah, *Onii-chan*, take it easy. Here, relax. Have some tea."

Yuka passed him a cup, and he drank. It was sweet. *Oh, yeah. The green tea and the sugar.*

"How is it?" Yuka asked, innocently.

"You know what? Not too bad, actually."

"Really? Gimme, gimme!" She snatched the cup back, and then moved it tentatively towards her lips. She sipped carefully, and then her eyes widened, as if she had just made an incredible discovery. "See? I told you all along, didn't I? Fortune favors the bold!"

Arato couldn't help but be sucked in by her silliness. He sighed.

Yuka was on school duty roster that morning, so she set out for her junior high earlier than Arato. Lacia and Arato were left alone together in the house.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this modeling gig?” Arato asked.

Lacia was done tidying up after breakfast, and all household chores were finished for the time being, so she took a seat across the table from Arato. He had given her free reign to choose her own clothing, but she seemed happy enough with his cast-offs. The only problem was that seeing her wearing his old clothes gave him butterflies in his stomach.

“Yes, I’ve checked over the paperwork and all seems to be in order. It’s a fairly standard proxy labor contract.”

An hIE belonged to its owner, so whenever an hIE took on a job for a third party the law mandated that officially it was the owner who was employed, and that the hIE was merely representing its owner. So officially it was Arato’s name on Lacia’s modeling contract, and as he was still a minor he had needed to get his father to counter-sign it, hence the PortaCom call last night.

The forms had been far too complex for Arato to understand, so he had just let Lacia handle them. It seemed that hIEs were often used as secretaries and paralegals to handle just that sort of thing.

“That’s good. I just don’t want you to feel under pressure because Yuka got carried away on one of her notions. I swear, one of these days I’m going to sit her down and have a *proper* talk with her about acting responsibly.”

“Really, Master? I find it hard to believe you’ll ever be too strict with her. She’s the apple of your eye.”

*Bulls-eye.* There was nothing Arato could say in response to that.

“I’m sorry, just explain that to me again, please. How do you just *find* an hIE?” Kengo asked.

When Arato finally got round to telling his two friends about Lacia, they both looked at Arato like he’d lost his mind. They were in their classroom, the only ones left after the school day had finished.

**“What was I supposed to do? She asked me to become her owner, so I did.”**  
Arato said it as if it was nothing, that anyone in his position would have done the same.

Kengo begged to differ. **“You know that even your standard base model hIE easily costs as much as a mid-sized car, right? So how much do you think a fancy model such as yours would cost? One capable of winning a major modeling competition right off the bat? Didn't you think to go to the police?”**

**“Well, if she is so expensive then wouldn't her original owner have come forward once the competition results were announced? Her details aren't exactly being kept secret, you know. Half the country must have seen her face by now.”**  
In truth, Arato was at least partially in agreement with Kengo. He had even considered getting Lacia to turn down the modeling contract, and it was only when Lacia persuaded him that there were potential benefits to being in the public eye that Arato had reluctantly assented.

**“Hm,”** Kengo said, **“I suppose you do make a good point there, Endo.”**

**“Anyway, I'll show you now. It'd be easier if we just went and saw her in the flesh, of course.”** Arato said.

**“So your hIE can answer calls on its own, huh, Arato?”** Ryo asked, peering over at the PortaCom that Arato was using to dial his home line. He had decided to introduce Lacia to his friends today over the PortaCom system.

The credit-card-sized screen on Arato's PortaCom started flashing—*dialing*. The call was picked up by his house phone on the third ring. Lacia's face came up on the screen, her eyes elegant and calm.

**-Hello, Master. Are these two gentlemen the friends you've told me so much about, perhaps?**

Ryo and Kengo gasped. They were momentarily speechless. *Yep, that was the effect that Lacia had on people when they first saw her in the flesh, all right. Or not even in the flesh, in this instance.*

Ryo, standing there in a half-done-up uniform, was the first to recover. “So *that’s* why we’ve seen so little of you lately, Arato! What kind of a friend are you, keeping something like this all to yourself?”

When Kengo regained his breath, the first thing he did was pull out his laptop from his book-bag. “Endo, could you ask your hIE to tell me its Serial Number? This is no ordinary model.”

“Uh, Lacia, do you know what he means by that? A Serial Number? Kengo’s great with computers and stuff, so he might be able to help me figure out stuff about you.”

Through the screen, Lacia answered immediately, enunciating every letter clearly. **-My Serial Number is LSLX-22599176LF, Master. Shall I also give you my Unique Identifier Code?**

Lacia read out some numbers, and these appeared automatically on Kengo’s screen. Kengo stared at the numbers in silence, stood up, had Arato place his PortaCom on a desk, and pulled Arato out into the corridor.

Arato was concerned at his usually placid friend’s sudden excitement. “Hey, what’s happening?”

“Endo, have you *lost your mind?*” Kengo hissed. “An LSLX? That the flagship Stylus model! Didn’t you even do your basic checks? Do you even realize what you have in your hands?”

Stylus was an American ultra-high-end hIE manufacturer. Even Arato had heard of the name, the brand, but as an ordinary high school student he didn’t really have much of an idea of the prices involved: he was entirely removed from that world. Better to ask about something closer to home.

“What’s a Unique Identifier Code?” he asked.

“A UIC? It’s like a signal that all hIEs have to broadcast at regular intervals,” Kengo said. “They’re mandated by law, so that you can tell the difference between hIE and humans. You can use it to track a missing hIE, for example. You wouldn’t want to lose something as precious as this, after all.”

Ryo, who had remained in the classroom, popped his head out into the corridor and had caught some of the exchange. He too was unfazed at the suggestion that Lacia had some outlandish price tag, though, but for different reasons from Arato, perhaps—as the son of a prominent CEO, they were now talking his language.

“The UIC can’t be decoded, but it can be traced to its source,” Ryo added, and then continued when Arato clearly failed to grasp the implications of what he was saying. “A dealer who sells hIEs will have their UICs as an anti-theft precaution. So that the hIE could be tracked down if it were ever stolen. So why haven’t they tracked *your* hIE down, Arato, that’s the question? They *could*, unless the hIE is in some sort of state where it can’t broadcast.”

“Yes, they might not be able to decode the UIC as such, but they could extract a signal close enough for them to pin down the hIE’s location,” said Kengo. “And yet neither the owner nor the dealer seem to want to come forward. Endo’s sister entered the hIE into a big public competition, right? And yet even so, nobody’s been in contact. Weird.”

By this stage Arato felt completely excluded from this conversation, which as far as he could tell seemed to be mainly about judging him and his sister for their casual attitude towards recent events. To Arato, though, it was his friends who were taking things too seriously.

“Well, I guess I just lucked out, then,” Arato said. “No dealer, no owner, no worries. Right?”

Kengo looked aghast, and Ryo was the first to speak. “Wrong. Be worried. If it sounds too good to be true, it always is.”

“Endo, just think about it,” Kengo continued, after recovering. “When was the last time you heard of anyone ‘just lucking out’ and finding, say, a brand new car? A Ferrari just lying around with no owner. What would you do if the Ferrari suddenly turned round to you and asked you to become *its* owner? You’d run a mile, right?”

“You do like comparing hIE to cars, don’t you?” Arato said. It wasn’t meant to be a loaded comment---as far as Arato was concerned, he was just telling the truth.

Twilight seeped into the school through the large glass windows.

“Geez. Mr. Kaidai, what do you say, shall we knock some sense into him?”

Kengo said, exasperated. He sounded only half-joking.

Ryo, however, did have a responsible side that occasionally manifested itself, and Arato was his friend. “Look. Arato,” he said, “you should really talk to your father about this.”

“I already have! And he said it was fine for Lacia to stay with us!”

Arato's two friends exchanged glances of disbelief. But they both respected Arato's father, who worked on an important public-private sector research project. It would have to do, for now.

Ryo decided to change the subject, and looped his arm around Arato's neck. “Fine, we get it. But in that case, why the hell did you wait a whole *week* before spilling the beans? I thought we were supposed to be buddies?”

The three boys made their way back into the classroom to look at Arato's PortaCom again. Lacia was still on the other side of the screen, waiting patiently. - **Your friends sure do look out for you, don't they, Master?**

“Yeah, they've got my back,” he said. Arato didn't think there was anything suspicious about Lacia. But his friends were wary of her, even though Arato had explained to them how she had saved his life.

Ryo spoke, not at Lacia but directly to Arato. “Get her to send her Behavior Management Cloud serial number, too.”

Before Arato had the chance to say anything to Lacia, she was transmitting a 40-something long alphanumeric code string straight into Arato's terminal. Ryo used his own PortaCom to take a copy. “hIEs rely on Behavior Management Services to manage their actions. We should be able to use this serial number to work out which company is managing her right now.”

An hIE's actions weren't determined from within its own hardware. Rather, it exchanged wireless signals with huge external network, a cloud, that processed

the stimuli that an hIE was receiving, and calculated an appropriate response and transmitted it back to the hIE.

Ryo's device finished processing the serial data, and Ryo grimaced. Arato put a hand on Ryo's arm. He knew his childhood friend well. He knew how hard Ryo took bad news, and how he could never hide it.

Resigned, Ryo showed Arato his screen.

*Memeframe Corporation, registered April 2105.*

"It's one of ours," Ryo said. His father was the president of Memeframe.

Lacia had no soul. Instead, her actions were regulated by Memeframe's cloud management platform.

"So haven't you heard anything about this, then, Ryo?" Arato asked, hopefully. But Ryo just hid his PortaCom away.

"Look, Arato. Maybe it's best we don't delve too deep." It was as if the curiosity and the interest that Ryo had shown until a moment ago had never existed. Arato felt like he was in some sort of twilight zone. Ryo's face was hard when he continued, "Just don't get involved with this hIE, ok?"

"Don't get involved?" Arato said, incredulously. "I'm her *owner!*"

Ryo, usually so confident, now had a hunted look about him. He averted his eyes. The blood seemed to have drained from his face, and Arato couldn't remember the last time he had seen his friend look this drawn.

Ryo managed a forced smile and said, "Look, Arato. Forget about her. Let her go. You've got a nice life, right? Why risk complicating it with hIEs?"

**To Be Continued**



Source: <http://otakumode.com/sp/beatless/reader>

Redjuice is god.